

SPIRITUALITY AND LEISURE: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC LIFE-HISTORY STUDY

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Abstract

Life-history and auto-ethnography research methods were employed to explore the influence of spiritual beliefs upon individuals' leisure time activity throughout their life experience. Data were collected from a semi-structured discussion among 12 individuals with different spiritual backgrounds. Overall, it was found that religious and non-religious spirituality influenced participants' leisure participation at different stages of their lives in both positive and negative ways. Specifically, six themes emerged from this study: (1) Recreation and Play Catalyst; (2) Family Leisure and Religion; (3) Social Enabler; (4) Time and Schedule Conflicts; (5) Guilt and Fear; and (6) The Role of *Otherism*.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is the set of personal beliefs that individuals hold concerning the paradox of existence, and connects them with God, higher powers, or simply the natural world (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2008; Schmidt & Little, 2007). Individual's spirituality can manifest through religious or non-religious identification (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Religious identification occurs when an institution guides the beliefs and traditions of a group of individuals (Zuefle, 1999). Broadly, the principles and guidelines of each religious faction are varied, and even more differentiating are the virtues of personal spirituality (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

Depending on the intensity of institutional, interpersonal and personal commitment, spirituality and religion influence individual's activities in distinct ways, along with other social and political factors (Bouma & Lennon, 2003; Tekin, 2010). In this sense, spirituality coexists within the leisurely lifestyle practices of some, and acts as mutually exclusive entities or remains non-existent for others (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Specifically, spiritual beliefs may influence leisure participation by incorporating, prohibiting, or disregarding certain pursuits (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006; Tekin, 2010; Walseth & Fasting, 2003).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and spiritual identification emerges into individual's leisure realm by shaping leisure preferences and participation. For example, social responsibility and strong reverence for family togetherness, commonly mandated by many religions, foster familial and friendly leisure activities and lifestyles (Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990; Agate, Zabriskie, & Eggett, 2007). Walseth and Fasting (2003) found that secular and fundamentalist Muslim women participate in sports as they perceive that such practices are encouraged by their holy beliefs.

Certain religious or spiritual lifestyles also inhibit leisure participation. For example, the use of veil and the power disparity between genders ascribed to certain Muslim factions are perceived as barriers for physical exercise (Tekin, 2010; Walseth & Fasting, 2003). Walseth and Fasting (2003) also note that such constraining context is more critical in those Muslim factions where women are seen as a source of sexual temptation, thus with less capacity to take decision on their leisure realm. However, the extent to how different religious and non-religious spiritual beliefs influence individual's leisure has yet to be fully understood; especially when considering how practices from certain faiths may inhibit leisure participation (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006).

3.0 METHODS

This study explores the role of spirituality in leisure participation by examining the influence of religious and non-religious spiritual beliefs upon individuals' leisure time activity throughout their life experience. Multi-modal qualitative techniques, combining life-history and auto-ethnography, were used for data collection and interpretation. Auto-ethnography is a researcher's first-person narrative of their own experiences, embedded within a socio-cultural context (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Life history is the narrative of a specific aspect of an individual's life interpreted by the researcher (Atkinson, 1998). Although auto-ethnography and life-history have drawn criticism for being narcissistic, unscientific, and problematic for establishing evaluative criteria, they have both also been recognized to provide insightful information on the meaning of individuals' lives and their struggles (Atkinson, 1998; Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

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Eleven graduate students and one instructor from the University of Missouri participated in a semi-structured discussion in 2010 about their life experiences on their perceived religion-leisure relationship. This study fulfilled the requirements of one course assignment. To avoid ethical issues, the students rather than the instructor, graded this assignment. Two weeks prior to the discussion, each participant completed a form with their demographic information and specific examples of how they perceived that their own spiritual and religious beliefs had positively and negatively influenced their leisure participation at different stages of their lives. A third party, a graduate student who was not enrolled in this course, used those forms to facilitate a three-hour group discussion, which was voice-recorded. Afterward, two groups of three participants each used the inductive method to identify emerging themes from the recorded data. Emerging themes were later triangulated with the facilitator's findings to reduce subjectivity. Thus, life-history and auto-ethnography blend in this study, as their participants examined and interpreted their own as well as other's life experiences. The authors are not only narrating and interpreting their own experiences as participants (auto-ethnography), but they are also giving meaning to other participants' experiences (life-history).

Study participants consisted of eight women and four men who ranged between 22 and 42 years ($M = 27$). Nine participants were single, three were either married or partnered; and two had children. Half of the participants ($n = 6$) were from the Midwest U.S., while the remaining were from China ($n = 3$), Peru ($n = 2$), and Thailand ($n = 1$). Participants' spiritual and religious beliefs during childhood were Catholicism ($n = 5$), Buddhism ($n = 3$), Protestant –including Methodist and Presbyterian– ($n = 3$), and Atheism ($n = 1$). Half of participants ($n = 6$) altered their beliefs towards Atheism and non-practicing when they moved away from home and entered into adulthood while the other half ($n = 6$) retained their childhood beliefs. Pseudonyms are used throughout narrative to assure the anonymity of study participants. Due to the large proportion of non-native English speakers, minor grammar corrections have been included in textual citations to increase readability. Unnecessary wording (e.g., “mmm”, “well, you know”) have been removed from textual citations and noted as: (...) to increase flow.

4.0 FINDINGS

The results of this study indicated that individual's religious and non-religious spirituality has influenced participants' leisure participation at different stages of their lives, both positively and negatively. Specifically, five themes emerged from group discussion: (1) Leisure, Recreation and Play Catalyst; (2) Family Leisure and Religion; (3) Social Enabler; (4) Time and Schedule Conflicts; and (5) Fears and Guilt. In addition, the discussion also indicated that beyond one's own spiritual beliefs, others' spirituality also influence leisure participation.

4.1 *Leisure, Recreation and Play Catalyst*

Most participants recalled that their religious activities served as a catalyst for recreation and play, including sports, especially during their childhood. For example, Robby (Catholic) mentioned: “I remember the only reason [why] I ever started playing basketball was through this church group.” Spirituality also served as a catalyst for less active leisure activities (e.g., yoga, meditation) during participants' adulthood. Kirsten (Buddhist) stated:

“It happens to me when I work, and I have a lot of things on my mind and I need to escape. (...) I go to the temple which is close to my office; the area is very big and has trees and [a] peaceful feeling. And I would go and sit and think of something or bring a book to read or try to relax myself over there.”

Interestingly, religion was also perceived as a catalyst for leisure in an indirect way. Maria (non-practicing Catholic) and Candy (Methodist) mentioned that religious obligations of their kids provide them with additional leisure time. Maria said:

“Now I am using the time when my kids are in school, in church school, (...) to go with my husband, just the both of us. Something that we haven't done in many years, maybe ten years...”

4.2 *Family Leisure and Religion*

Spirituality also fosters some family togetherness, which participants interpreted as good opportunities for contemplation, introspection, or pure leisure. For instance, Pan (non-practicing Buddhist) still enjoys accompanying her parents to temples as those visits are opportunities for leisure introspection. Jill (Buddhist) stated that she and her parents are always looking for new temples to visit and make wishes to Buddha as a leisure pastime: “For my family and I, we go to some tourist destinations just to meet the Buddha; here the main purpose is for leisure...”

For others, the observance of religious practices has been the condition towards weekly family leisure traditions. Candy (Methodist) still goes after Sunday services to her “Grandma's”, where siblings and cousins meet for lunch and fun, tradition that is being passed on to next generations. C.J. (Catholic) shared a family tradition that started in his juvenile years:

“For my family, if we can't make it to church (...) we'll take an hour on a Sunday and we'll go walking in a park or walk together. [We'll] talk with each other to kind of have a leisure/religion time, I guess, combined (...) it's a time of togetherness with our family.”

However, Rose (Atheist) challenged the role of religion as a family leisure time facilitator. She argued that similar traditions occur in China, where family leisure traditions are fostered by the “one-child policy.”

4.3 *Social Enabler*

For the majority, spirituality was an opportunity to expand their friendship network at different life-stages, as they could mingle with people other than their classmates and neighbors. Jeremy (former devout protestant, currently agnostic) mentioned that during his adolescence and early adulthood, church was a safe place to find friends like him, not interested in partying and drinking, thus he didn't feel marginalized for being different. Some participants mentioned that their religious youth groups played an important socialization role. Robby (Catholic) mentioned:

"I remember when I was a kid, I was enrolled in catechism classes (...) we'd do like group things with kids in my age group (...) We'd watch movies, play dodge ball (...) The biggest positive thing that I got from, I guess, my religious experience and just being there was meeting new people."

However, the role of religion seems to be relative to some contextual factors. C.J. (Catholic) and Penelope (Catholic) find that the social role of their religion varies on where they attend services. Penelope mentioned: "When I go [to church] back home it's not really a socializing deal (...) But when I go here, I'm like actually socializing with my friends and everything, I enjoy going."

4.4 *Time and Schedule Conflict*

Spirituality, especially in its religious form, has also challenged leisure/recreation throughout participants' life. Candy (Methodist) explained how her family can't engage in leisure activities on Sundays due to mass and fellowship duties which take most of her day. Similarly, C.J. (Catholic) stated:

"Religion was a simple time constraint, I have to go to church for an hour instead of going to participate [in a game]. Most of the time it was a sporting activity so I'd a baseball game or basketball game at a certain time, but we'd always have to go to church so there were a few times where I'd miss my sporting event."

4.5 *Fears and Guilt*

Fears and feelings of guilt induced by certain religions also constrained participants' leisure. Some participants recalled that during their adolescence, certain movies, books, and even popular music were restricted because they were considered to be against their beliefs. Sarah (non-practicing Catholic) mentioned:

"I think it was even with books (...) most of his books sadly talk about either drugs, sex or gay people, so reading a book written by him, in my high school was like the worst thing you could ever do, you couldn't even mention his name. So when someone said "have you read this books?" and I'm like "no, we are not supposed to", "hold on, I'll give it to you", it was kinda like a hidden transaction, you know, nobody could really know that you were doing that cause it was like sinful."

A major discussion arose when several participants, all with Christian upbringing, mentioned that they feared to play Ouija when younger because such board game was explicitly forbidden by their religion group. In some cases, such fears were so overwhelming that they were still having an effect on participants. Maria (non-practicing catholic) stated that she still wouldn't dare to play such game: "I got the same thing, I mean, you should not play the (...) Ouija board because I guess that the spirit can possess you (...) I'm over my 40s and I couldn't play that game; I mean, I'm really afraid of it."

Feelings of guilt associated with participants' spiritual beliefs also influenced leisure life of participants. Robby (Catholic) mentioned that during his adolescence he wouldn't engage in some activities, mostly related to partying, drinking or pre-marital sex, because he feared confessing them to his priest. He even feared practicing skate-boarding due to the negative image it held within his church.

4.6 *The Role of Otherism in the Spirituality-Leisure Interface*

In addition to one's own spirituality influencing leisure life-styles and activities, discussions exposed that others' spirituality can also affect one's leisure participation. Jasper (Presbyterian raised, currently Atheist) said that he is looking for the opportunity to attend an African-American church in the South because of its musicality and energy. Similarly, Rose (Atheist) mentioned how much she enjoys visiting temples to appreciate architectural details, and how overall she likes attending religious ceremonies and services because they are opportunities to mingle with different people.

"In Beijing I go to a Catholic church for Christmas Eve, and I think it is interesting (...). Most of them are Catholic but I am not; I just go there and watch (...) My friends going with me also don't have a religion, maybe they are Buddhist, I don't know."

Other's spiritual beliefs also seem to negatively impact participant's leisure time. Candy (Methodist) mentioned how her family gatherings are very stressful when they include her "Baptist" family branch; she feels much stressed because she needs to behave in certain ways (e.g., no alcoholic drinks, no cursing). However, Penelope (Catholic) differed; she doesn't feel out of place among the leisure activities she participates after the non-denominational Christian services she sometimes attends with her friends.

It is worth mentioning that those constraints were perceived to be stronger during participants' childhood. Robby (Catholic) recalled that in his adolescence he couldn't play basketball with a close Muslim friend during Ramadan observance. Candy (Methodist) also recalled difficulties playing with her friends during weekends because of church obligations:

"Well my friends (...) were Methodists, the other set were Catholic (...) and that would limit the recreation that we could do as friends because they were in church on Saturday afternoon, early evening; and then they would be free on

Sunday, but then on Sunday I would be in church (...) it put a damper on our leisure and recreation as a group of friends.”

5.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study responds to a need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and leisure realms of individuals (Stodolska & Livengood, 2006). Results of this study provide support to previous work which connected spiritual beliefs to leisure pursuits in a positive way (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2008; Schmidt & Little, 2007) through the expansion of recreation opportunities, leisure family time, and social interactions of individuals (Abbott et al., 1990, Agate et al., 2007). Results of this study also expanded previous work concerning leisure constraints associated with strict Muslim religious factions (Tekin, 2010; Walseth & Fasting, 2003). Specifically, it was found that leisure constraints in the forms of time conflicts, fear and guilt, are also applicable to other faiths (e.g., Christianity), findings that should be further explored among different spiritualities. Importantly, a novel theme also emerged in this study: other's spirituality can influence one's own leisure participation. Thus, future studies should examine the extent to which individuals have their leisure time and activities affected by other's spirituality. Study findings suggest that leisure facilitators, especially those working with a young clientele, should be aware that spiritual beliefs are another form of intrapersonal constraints that may hinder leisure participation.

In addition to recognizing the subjectivity of study findings, especially as participants and data interpreters were one in the same, the authors also recognize benefits and limitations associated with the study sample. It was beneficial because the plurality of participants' beliefs and cultural backgrounds helped to identify how various spiritual beliefs affect individuals' leisure in both, positive and negative ways. However, such sample also posed two main challenges that should be controlled for in future studies: (1) the relative young age of study participants, and (2) the existing bonding among participants as most were cohort peers. Both situations may have restricted discussion of sensitive themes (e.g., sex behavior, drug use) or may explain why the narrative mostly centered on positive religion-leisure interactions.

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